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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 002689

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TAGS: PGOV MARR RP

SUBJECT: NEW DEFENSE SECRETARY VOWS TO CONTINUE PHILIPPINE DEFENSE REFORM

REF: MANILA 2238

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Paul W. Jones, reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (U) In an August 8 swearing-in ceremony, new Secretary of National Defense Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr. vowed that Philippine Defense Reform will be a top priority under his leadership, stating that he intends to continue the reforms that have already begun. "We all wish to see the Armed Forces evolve into a truly capable fighting force," Teodoro said, adding that he is considering new ways to improve the ability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines to manufacture their own weapons and ammunition.

¶2. (U) Secretary Teodoro also pledged aggressively to pursue Abu Sayyaf terrorists, referencing the Basilan incident where 14 Philippine Marines were executed and 10 were beheaded. "We shall pursue the Abu Sayyaf bandits vigorously," he vowed, while also expressing his support for continuing peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and his interest in re-initiating talks with the communist insurgents.

¶3. (C) Comment: The 43-year old Teodoro, a three term Congressman and long-time Embassy contact, will be one of the youngest Philippine Defense Secretaries ever. He is a loyalist of President Arroyo, as well as a nephew of former President Corazon Aquino, who sides with the political opposition. Teodoro brings energy, political experience, service as a military reservist, and civilian status to the Department of National Defense. We are confident that the Philippine Defense Department and military will remain firm partners in our counterterrorism and reform efforts on Teodoro's watch.

¶4. (U) For additional biographical information, see reftel.

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JONES